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New Utah airport provides economic boost for region

By James Nelson

SALT LAKE CITY, Utah, April 11 (Reuters Life!) - The skies are opening up in the western state of Utah thanks to a new \$159 million regional airport and daily flights from Los Angeles.

The airport for St. George, 300 miles (482 km) south of Salt Lake City and 120 miles (193 km) northwest of Las Vegas, boasts a 9,300 foot (2,834 meter) runway five times longer than the old airport runway.

Airport officials say the facility can handle commercial jet airliners and business jets.

"This is going to be the economic engine that drives us. It will bring the types of businesses and jobs that we need," St. George Mayor Dan McArthur said in an interview.

Daily flights to Los Angeles from the airport, which had a grand opening in January, started in March, and there is a possibility of expanding service to Denver and Phoenix, officials said.

City leaders see the airport as important to economic and business growth in St. George, which has a population of more than 70,000, and the region near the intersection of the Utah, Nevada and Arizona borders.

"We've already seen significant activity generated by the new facility," said Scott Hirschi, director of the Washington County Economic Development Council. "Things have definitely turned around from where we were a year ago and two years ago when activity was almost non-existent."

Access to Utah's five national parks and 45 state parks will be improved with the new airport, officials say.

"I put up this development much like the freeway coming through. It's on that scale on what it will do for us in the future," said McArthur.

As vacation season gets underway he said scenic flights, charter flights and tourism are expected to flourish.

"Zion National Park, which is only 40 miles away, is a tremendous draw. They get over 2 million visitors a year," said McArthur.

Aside from tourism, the airport could be a plus for boosting various aviation-related businesses, he said.

St. George officials say several companies moved to the area once the new airport became a reality.

(Editing by Jerry Norton; For the latest Reuters lifestyle news see: <http://www.reuters.com/news/lifestyle>)